11-02-00

PATENT
Attorney Docket No.: **TFUND-04809**

7

jc490 U.S. PTO 11/01/00

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE

201
203x25
202x3
551

Box Patent Application
Assistant Commissioner For Patents
Washington, D.C. 20231

jc922 U.S. PTO 09/703562 11/01/00

NEW APPLICATION TRANSMITTAL

Transmitted herewith for filing is the patent application of William C. O'Neil, Jr. and Michael P. Thompson for **Methods And Systems For Applying Rebates To Higher Eduction**.

CERTIFICATION UNDER 37 C.F.R. § 1.10

I hereby certify that this New Application Transmittal and the documents referred to as enclosed therein are being deposited with the U.S. Postal Service on this date **November 1, 2000** in an envelope as "Express Mail Post Office to Addressee" Mailing Label Number **EL 658 777 418 US** addressed to: **Box Patent Application**, Assistant Commissioner For Patents, Washington, D.C. 20231.

Mary Ellen Waite

Mary Ellen Waite

1. **Type Of Application**

This new application is for a(n)

☒ Original (nonprovisional)

2. **Papers Enclosed That Are Required For Filing Date Under 37 C.F.R. § 1.53(b) (Regular) or 37 C.F.R. § 1.153 (Design) Application**

34 Pages of Specification
7 Pages of Claims
1 Page of Abstract
6 Sheets of Formal Drawings

3. **Declaration**

☒ Enclosed

☒ Executed by inventors.

4. **Inventorship Statement**

The inventorship for all the claims in this application is:

☒ the same

5. **Language**

☒ English

6. **Assignment**

☒ An assignment of the invention to **TuitionFund, Inc.** is attached.

☒ Form PTO-1595 is also attached.

7. **Fee Calculation (37 C.F.R. § 1.16)**

☒ Regular application

CLAIMS AS FILED

Number Filed	Number Extra	Rate	Basic Fee - $710.00 (37 C.F.R. § 1.16(a))
Total Claims (37 C.F.R. § 1.16(c))	48 - 20 =	28 × $18.00 =	$504.00
Independent Claims (37 C.F.R. § 1.16(b))	6 - 3 =	3 × $80.00 =	$240.00
Multiple Dependent Claim(s), if any (37 C.F.R. § 1.16(d))		+ $270.00 =	$0.00
		Filing Fee Calculation	$1454.00

8. **Small Entity Statement(s)**

☒ Verified Statement(s) that this is a filing by a small entity under 37 C.F.R. §§ 1.9 and 1.27 is(are) attached.

Filing Fee Calculation (50% of above) $727.00

9. Fee Payment Being Made At This Time

☒ Enclosed

☒	basic filing fee	$727.00
☒	recording assignment (37 C.F.R. § 1.21(h))	$40.00
	Total Fees Enclosed	**$767.00**

10. Method of Payment of Fees

☒ Check in the amount of **$767.00**

11. Authorization To Charge Additional Fees and Credit Overpayment

☒ The Commissioner is hereby authorized to charge payment of any fees associated with this communication or credit any overpayment to Deposit Account No.: **08-1290**. **An originally executed duplicate of this transmittal is enclosed for this purpose.**

12. Power of Attorney by Assignee

☒ Enclosed

13. Return Receipt Postcard

☒ Enclosed

Dated: November 1, 2000

J. Mitchell Jones
Registration No.: 44,174

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☒ **Statement Where No Further Pages Added**

☒ This transmittal ends with this page.

09530.04809

Applicant / Patentee: William C. O'Neil, Jr. *et al.*
For: **Methods And Systems For Applying Rebates To Higher Eduction**

VERIFIED STATEMENT (DECLARATION) CLAIMING SMALL ENTITY STATUS (37 CFR § 1.9(c) - SMALL BUSINESS CONCERN)

I hereby declare that I am an official of the small business concern empowered to act on behalf of the concern identified below:

TuitionFund, Inc.
28 White Bridge Road, Suite 311, Nashville, TN 37205

I hereby declare that the above-identified small business concern qualifies as a small business concern as defined in 13 CFR §§ 121.3-18, and reproduced in 37 CFR § 1.9(d), for purposes of paying reduced fees under §§ 41(a) and (b) of Title 35, United States Code, in that the number of employees of the concern, including those of its affiliates, does not exceed 500 persons. For purposes of this statement, (1) the number of employees of the business concern is the average over the previous fiscal year of the concern of the persons employed on a full-time, part-time or temporary basis during each of the pay periods of the fiscal year, and (2) concerns are affiliates of each other when either, directly or indirectly, one concern controls or has the power to control the other, or a third party or parties controls or has the power to control both.

I hereby declare that rights under contract or law have been conveyed to and remain with the small business concern identified above with regard to the invention entitled **Methods And Systems For Applying Rebates To Higher Eduction** by inventors named **William C. O'Neil, Jr. *et al.***, described in the specification filed herewith.

I acknowledge the duty to file, in this application or patent, notification of any change in status resulting in loss of entitlement to small entity status prior to paying, or at the time of paying, the earliest of the issue fee or any maintenance fee due after the date on which status as a small entity is no longer appropriate. (37 CFR § 1.28(b)).

I hereby declare that all statements made herein of my own knowledge are true and that all statements made on information and belief are believed to be true; and further that these statements were made with the knowledge that willful false statements and the like so made are punishable by fine or imprisonment, or both, under Section 1001 of Title 18 of the United States Code, and that such willful false statements may jeopardize the validity of the application, any patent issuing thereon, or any patent to which this verified statement is directed.

Date: 10/24/00

By: [signature]

Name: William C. O'Neil, JR

Title: Chief Executive Officer

DOCKET NO. 04809

METHODS AND SYSTEMS FOR APPLYING REBATES TO HIGHER EDUCATION

This application claims priority to provisional application 60/208,727, filed June 2, 2000.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to methods and systems for funding a higher education by accumulating and managing merchant rebates.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The dramatically increasing costs of higher education have unfortunately put the benefits of a higher education out of the reach of many people. However, the value of higher education has never been more evident. For example, in today's technology driven economies many job opportunities require advanced scientific and technical training. Indeed, a recent study conducted by the U.S. Labor Department estimated that in the year 2000, 85% of the nation's jobs will require education or training above the high school level. Moreover, as international commercial, political, and cultural ties continue to deepen in the present atmosphere of globalization, the benefits of a well rounded education become ever more apparent.

Individuals with post-secondary degrees typically receive higher salaries than those individuals without such degrees. According to a recent study conducted by the College Board, the lifetime earnings of individuals with a bachelor's degree are 51% higher than those with only a high school diploma. Similarly, the average annual salary for a college graduate is currently $59,048, compared with $33,779 for those individuals with only a high school diploma.

Although, Americans consistently rank the ability to pay for their child's college education as one of their primary concerns, the average debt load carried by recent college graduates continues to soar each year. According to Provident Mutual.com, 87% of current

students say that college costs will soon be "out of reach," 52% say that any additional debt will put them in serious risk, and 38% say that college is "not affordable" right now. Thus, while higher education is emerging as a critical factor to future success in the job market, the financial burden of obtaining a degree is rising dramatically. A study by the College Board determined that the current average price (tuition plus room and board) of one year at a private four-year university was $20,273 for the 1998-1999 school year. For the same time period at a public post secondary institution, the price was $7,773. Recent college-cost increases have easily outpaced the U.S. economy's overall inflation rate in the past ten years, and the National College Resource Association estimates that by the year 2017 one year at a private four year university will cost $61,251, while one year at a public institution will be $28,787.

For today's newborn, experts estimate that parents must save approximately $216 per month for 18 years to cover the entire four year tuition costs at a public institution. In 1997, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the median income for a four-person family was $53,350, indicating that college saving for two children would require 10% of pre-tax income for a four-person family.

For families unable to save sufficient funds for college expenses, student borrowing has emerged as the next best solution. The current level of college borrowing in the United States is approaching $40 billion. Student borrowing in the last five years has exceeded the growth rate of college costs by three times and personal income by four times. According to ProvidentMutual.com, two-thirds of borrowers claim that their student loans represent a "major financial hardship."

As a result of the increasing costs associated with higher education, in the last five years there has been a proliferation of government sponsored and private programs designed to help parents save for their children's college education. Recognition of the financial hardships related to saving or borrowing for college has led many families to seek solutions to the problem, which in turn has created an emerging industry of college savings options. State created tuition savings plans are currently available in forty-six states, and in less than five years have amassed in excess of $7 billion in invested assets. The federal government has also created "Educational IRA's" and other tax incentives related to education investments.

Most major brokerage firms and mutual funds now market programs designed to encourage parents to save for college expenses, and have been extremely successful in attracting investors.

Some drawbacks of these tuition savings programs include obligatory contributions, large amounts of after tax income needed to fund the programs, limitations on school selection offered to the student, restrictions on the funds at maturation, and the potential of program cancellations without guarantee of admittance. Since most state plans require contributors to sign binding contracts that lock in a payment schedule, such plans therefore obligate contributors, and require them to make a special effort to make payments. Moreover, the various private tuition savings programs also require contributors to make special financial sacrifices to save for tuition costs.

What is needed are methods and systems for accumulating monies for funding a college tuition that do not place a significant financial burden on the user.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

The following figures form part of the present specification and are included to further demonstrate certain aspects and embodiments of the present invention. The invention may be better understood by reference to one or more of these figures in combination with the detailed description of specific embodiments presented herein.

Figure 1 illustrates the various funds and accounts available to registered members for holding member rebates.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the registered member and non-registered user access to the TuitionFund.com Web Site.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the privileges, services, and links available to registered members.

Figure 4 provides an overview of one merchant rebate sales embodiment.

Figure 5 provides an overview of one merchant rebate sales embodiment.

Figure 6 provides an overview of one merchant rebate sales embodiment.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to methods and systems for funding a higher education by accumulating and managing merchant rebates.

In some embodiments, the present invention provides a method comprising: a) providing: i) a member, ii) at least one higher education account, and iii) at least one merchant offering a rebate; b) calculating a rebate on purchases made by the member from at least one merchant; and c) crediting said at least one higher education account. In further embodiments, the calculating step is performed by a processor configured to calculate the rebate. In further embodiments, the at least one higher education account is stored in a computer memory area and said processor is connected to said higher education account via a computer network. In still other embodiments, the crediting step is performed by a processor configured to credit the at least one higher education account. In other embodiments, the crediting step further comprises crediting said higher education account with an amount equal to or less than said rebate. In still further embodiments, the present invention comprises step d) managing the at least one higher education account. In still other embodiments, the methods of the present invention further comprise providing a tracking entity, wherein said tracking entity tracks the purchases and rebates, and determines the specific rebate amount due to each member. In some embodiments, the methods of the present invention further comprise providing a rebate network manager, wherein the rebate manager network debits the merchant and credits the higher education account.

The present invention is not limited to a particular rebate amounts. Indeed, in some embodiments, the rebate amounts may range from 0.01% to 50%, preferably from 1% to 30%. The present invention is not limited to processors located at a particular site. Indeed, the processors may be located at a variety of sites. In some other embodiments, the merchant is on-line and purchases are made on-line. Likewise, the present invention is not limited to a particular higher education account. Indeed, the present invention contemplates a variety of higher education accounts, including, but not limited to, student loan payment accounts, educational IRAs, college fund savings accounts, and college charitable contribution accounts.

In still further embodiments, the present invention provides a method comprising: a) providing: i) a member, ii) at least one higher education account, iii) at least one merchant, iv) a computer network, v) a rebate network manager, and vi) a processor; b) via said

processor, calculating a rebate on purchases made by the member from the at least one merchant and debiting the at least one merchant and crediting the at least one higher education account, wherein the purchases are tracked by the rebate network manager and wherein the processor and the rebate network manager are connected via the computer network. In still further embodiments, the methods of the present invention further comprise step d) transferring funds from a student loan payment account to a student loan provider via a computer network.

In still other embodiments, the present invention provides a system comprising a memory device comprising member higher education accounts; a processor configured to calculate a rebate on purchases and to credit the member higher education accounts with proceeds from the rebate, wherein the memory device and the processor are connected via a computer network. As above, the present invention is not limited to a particular higher education account. Indeed, the present invention contemplates a variety of higher education accounts, including, but not limited to, student loan payment accounts, educational IRAs, college fund savings accounts, and college charitable contribution accounts. Also as above, the present invention is not limited to particular rebate amounts. Indeed, in some embodiments, the rebate amounts may range from 0.01% to 50%, preferably from 1% to 30%. The present invention is not limited to purchases made by a particular method. Indeed, a variety of purchasing methods may be used, including, but not limited to, the use of credit cards and debit cards. In still further embodiments, the purchases are tracked by a rebate network manager. In other embodiments, the rebate network manager tracks the purchases by correlating a registered credit number with said purchases.

In further embodiments, the present invention provides a system comprising a memory device and a processor in communication with the memory device, the processor configured to receive a credit from a rebate network manager and place the credit in a higher education account stored in the memory device.

Definitions

To facilitate understanding of the invention, a number of terms and phrases are defined below:

As used herein, the term "higher education account" refers to a financial account that is used to fund or pay for post-high school (*i.e.*, post-secondary) education or contribute to a higher education institution (*e.g.*, college, university, or trade school). Examples of higher education accounts include, but are not limited to student loan payment accounts, educational IRAs, college fund savings accounts, college charitable contribution accounts, and state 529 accounts. Funds may be held in the accounts (*e.g.*, to collect interest) before being transferred to a higher educational institution or student loan creditor.

As used herein, the term "member" refers to a person registered with or belonging to an organization (*e.g.*, TuitionFund.com).

As used herein, the term "money manager" refers to a professional financial management group. It is contemplated that, examples of "money managers" include, but are not limited to, organizations such as Charles Schwab, Fidelity, American Express, and Merrill Lynch.

As used herein, the term "rebate network manager" refers to an entity (*e.g.*, InfoSpace) that correlates purchases made from merchants belonging to a network with rebates offered in conjunction with the purchases. In some cases, the "rebate network manager" debits a merchant account and credits an existing account (*e.g.*, higher education account).

As used herein, the term "tracking entity" refers to an entity (*e.g.*, Linkshare.com or Befree.com) that tracks and records purchases made by a consumer from merchants associated with a tracking entity.

As used herein, the term "on-line," when used in relation to a merchant, refers to a web page or collection of web pages (*e.g.*, a web site) where goods or services are for sale.

As used herein, the terms "on-site" and "point of sale," when used in relation to a merchant site, refers to a physical place of business where goods and services are offered for sale.

As used herein, the term "processor" refers to a device that performs a set of steps according to a program.

As used herein, the term "computer memory device" refers to any data storage device that is readable by a computer, including, but not limited to, hard disks, magnetic (floppy)

disks, compact discs, zip drives, and magnetic tape.

As used herein, the term "rebate" refers to a return of part of a payment.

As used herein, the term "client-server" refers to a model of interaction in a distributed system in which a program at one site sends a request to a program at another site and waits for a response. The requesting program is called the "client," and the program which responds to the request is called the "server." In the context of the World Wide Web (discussed below), the client is a "Web browser" (or simply "browser") which runs on a computer of a user; the program which responds to browser requests by serving Web pages is commonly referred to as a "Web server."

As used herein, the term "hyperlink" refers to a navigational link from one document to another, or from one portion (or component) of a document to another. Typically, a hyperlink is displayed as a highlighted word or phrase that can be selected by clicking on it using a mouse to jump to the associated document or documented portion.

As used herein, the term "hypertext system" refers to a computer-based informational system in which documents (and possibly other types of data entities) are linked together via hyperlinks to form a user-navigable "web."

As used herein, the term "Internet" refers to a collection of interconnected (public and/or private) networks that are linked together by a set of standard protocols (such as TCP/IP and HTTP) to form a global, distributed network. While this term is intended to refer to what is now commonly known as the Internet, it is also intended to encompass variations which may be made in the future, including changes and additions to existing standard protocols.

As used herein, the terms "World Wide Web" or "web" refer generally to both (i) a distributed collection of interlinked, user-viewable hypertext documents (commonly referred to as Web documents or Web pages) that are accessible via the Internet, and (ii) the client and server software components which provide user access to such documents using standardized Internet protocols. Currently, the primary standard protocol for allowing applications to locate and acquire Web documents is HTTP, and the Web pages are encoded using HTML. However, the terms "Web" and "World Wide Web" are intended to encompass future markup languages and transport protocols which may be used in place of (or in

addition to) HTML and HTTP.

As used herein, the term "web site" refers to a computer system that serves informational content over a network using the standard protocols of the World Wide Web. Typically, a Web site corresponds to a particular Internet domain name, such as "TuitionFund.com" and includes the content associated with a particular organization. As used herein, the term is generally intended to encompass both (i) the hardware/software server components that serve the informational content over the network, and (ii) the "back end" hardware/software components, including any non-standard or specialized components, that interact with the server components to perform services for Web site users.

As used herein, the term "HTML" refers to HyperText Markup Language which is a standard coding convention and set of codes for attaching presentation and linking attributes to informational content within documents. During a document authoring stage, the HTML codes (referred to as "tags") are embedded within the informational content of the document. When the Web document (or HTML document) is subsequently transferred from a Web server to a browser, the codes are interpreted by the browser and used to parse and display the document. Additionally in specifying how the Web browser is to display the document, HTML tags can be used to create links to other Web documents (commonly referred to as "hyperlinks").

As used herein, the term "HTTP" refers to HyperText Transport Protocol which is the standard World Wide Web client-server protocol used for the exchange of information (such as HTML documents, and client requests for such documents) between a browser and a Web server. HTTP includes a number of different types of messages which can be sent from the client to the server to request different types of server actions. For example, a "GET" message, which has the format GET, causes the server to return the document or file located at the specified URL.

As used herein, the term "URL" refers to Uniform Resource Locator which is a unique address which fully specifies the location of a file or other resource on the Internet. The general format of a URL is protocol://machine address:port/path/filename. The port specification is optional, and if none is entered by the user, the browser defaults to the standard port for whatever service is specified as the protocol. For example, if HTTP is

specified as the protocol, the browser will use the HTTP default port of 80.

As used herein, the term "cookies" refers to a technology that enables a Web server to retrieve information from a user's computer that reveals prior browsing activities of the user. The informational item stored on the user's computer (typically on the hard drive) is commonly referred to as a "cookie." Many standard Web browsers support the use of cookies.

As used herein, the term "PUSH technology" refers to an information dissemination technology used to send data to users over a network. In contrast to the World Wide Web (a "pull" technology), in which the client browser must request a Web page before it is sent, PUSH protocols send the informational content to the user computer automatically, typically based on information pre-specified by the user.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention utilizes certain aspects of the World Wide Web to help pay for or fund higher education or to allow charitable contributions to higher education institutions. Methods and systems are provided for generating funds for these uses through a rebate network. These methods and systems are described in more detail below in the following sections: I) Overview of The Types of Members' Funds and Accounts; II) Overview of Existing Registered Member Login and New Member Registration; III) Overview of the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links; and IV) Preferred Merchant / Member Rebate Sales Schemes [A. On-line Merchants Associated with the Rebate Network Manager; B. Merchants Not Registered with a Rebate Network Manager, but Associated with a Tracking Entity; and C. Off-line Merchants]. The methods and systems according to the present invention will be described with reference to Figures 1-6.

I. Overview of The Types of Members' Funds and Accounts

Figure 1 is a flow chart illustrating the flow of member rebate monies due a member from purchases consummated through participating on-line or point of sale merchants. In a preferred embodiment, the rebate monies earned by a member by participating in the TuitionFund.com program are centrally accumulated by a Rebate Network Manager 100. The

rebate monies earned by the member are then directed to a professional Money Manager 110. The professional Money Manager 110 may be a licensed financial agent, broker, or any firm offering financial management and brokerage services. Examples of contemplated Money Managers 110 might include, but are not limited to, the following firms offering financial services: American Express, Charles Schwab, Fidelity, or Merrill Lynch. The Money Manager 110 allocates the rebate monies earned by a particular member according to the desires of that member.

In preferred embodiments, any interest, dividends, stock splits, or the like earned by the member on any of a member's various investment fund and account options available 115 are reinvested according the to the member's desires in any of the member's various investment fund and account options 115, as allowed by law. In certain other embodiments, any investment principal, interest, dividends, stock splits, or the like, earned by the member on any of a member's various investment fund and account options 115 are disbursed directly to member's higher education creditors. In still further embodiments, any investment principal, interest, dividends, stock splits, or the like, earned by the member on any of a member's various investment fund and account options 115 are disbursed directly to the member earning such accretions, as allowed by law. In yet other embodiments, any investment principal, interest, dividends, stock splits, or the like, earned by the member on any of a member's various funds and accounts 115, are disbursed to another member's or other members' various funds and accounts 115.

In some preferred embodiments, as allowed by law, a member may elect to fund or partially fund any of the various investment fund and account options 115 available with monies other than those obtained by rebates from participating merchants. Similarly, in other preferred embodiments, a non-member may elect to fund or partially fund any of the various investment fund and account options 115 available to members.

In preferred embodiments, members may select from a number of available member investment fund and account options 120, 130, 140, 150, and 160 established for funding a higher education. In preferred embodiments, information, including balances, concerning the various member investment fund and account options 115 is stored or recorded in computer readable form in various data storage devices. Examples of data storage devices for storing

and recording member fund and account 115 information include, but are not limited to, magnetic media including, disks, tapes, and the like, optical storage media including, compact disk (CD) format, digital video disk (DVD) format, or the like, a processing device's random access memory (RAM), or a processing device's read only memory (ROM), etc. The present invention also contemplates that member investment fund and account options 115 balances and interest earned information will be provided and/or accessible regularly and periodically to each individual member. The present invention also contemplates providing periodic and regular member investment fund and account 115 balance and interest earned information to all entitled government and financial agencies, higher education creditors, and educational institutions as required by law. In some embodiments, member investment fund and account options 115 balance and interest earned information will be provided to the recipient by any acceptable manner, (*e.g.*, electronic mail, computer readable data, type-written or printed, etc.).

The present invention contemplates that the members' accumulated rebate monies held in their various investment fund and account options 115 be disbursed to the member's various higher education creditors. Similarly, the present invention also contemplates that member funds can be distributed directly to an institution or institutions of higher education.

In still other embodiments, the member may specify that an amount from their accumulated earned rebate monies in their various investment fund and account options 115 be disbursed for the benefit of another's higher education. Accordingly, in some particular embodiments, a member may have one or more other members contributing earned rebate monies to their funds and accounts 115. Thus, the invention contemplates that some members may earn rebate monies either exclusively or partially for the benefit of another member's various investment fund and account options 115.

In certain embodiments, the various investment options available to the member 115 may include Student Loan Payment Accounts 120. The present invention contemplates that available funds and accounts under the Student Loan Payment Account 120 option may comprise interest bearing annuities, mutual funds, bond funds, index funds, money market accounts, or any other investment grade security or equity, and the like. In preferred embodiments, member rebate monies accumulating in the available funds and accounts under

the Student Loan Payment Account 120 option are managed by the professional Money Manager 110 on an on-going basis.

In particularly preferred embodiments, member rebate monies accumulated in the various available funds and accounts of the Student Loan Payment Account 120 are disbursed directly by the Money Manager 100 to the member's various higher education creditors. The present invention, however, is not limited by the nature of the member's higher education creditors. Indeed, the present invention contemplates, that the member may be indebted for higher educational expenses to banks and other financial institutions, commercial loan companies, various state and federal government lending agencies, and private organizations. In particular, the present invention contemplates that the higher educational expenses owed by members may comprise expenses for tuition and fees, room and board, and any other expenses incidental to obtaining a higher education. The present invention also contemplates that member rebate monies held in member Student Loan Payment Accounts 120 may be used by the member to pay down existing higher education loans and debts. Additionally, the present invention contemplates the use of member funds to pay-down the interest that is accumulating while student loan payments are deferred (*i.e.*, before graduation).

In certain other embodiments, the various investment fund and account options 115 available to the member may include Educational IRAs 130. The present invention contemplates that available funds and accounts under the Educational IRAs 130 option may comprise interest bearing mutual funds, bond funds, index funds, money market accounts, or any other investment grade security or equity allowable by law. In preferred embodiments, the member Education IRAs 130 are managed by the professional Money Manager 100. In particularly preferred embodiments, when the member Educational IRAs 130 are managed by a professional Money Manager 100, the Money Manager 100 will provide the member with appropriate guidance and oversight of each member Educational IRAs 130 and additionally be to able provide all relevant accountings. In still other preferred embodiments, the Money Manager 100 managing the member's rebate monies accumulated in the funds and accounts of the member's Educational IRAs 130, will make the necessary disbursements to higher educational institutions, and other higher education creditors of the member.

In still other embodiments, a member may elect from the various investment funds and

account options available 115 to have the Money Manager 100 direct their earned rebate monies into a Higher Education Savings Fund 140. The present invention contemplates that the monies directed into a member's Higher Education Savings Fund 140 may be held in a number of various funds and accounts. In some embodiments, the various investment fund and account options that may comprise a member Higher Education Savings Fund 140 include money market accounts, regular savings accounts, bond funds, stock index funds, mutual funds, annuities, and any other investment grade security or equity, as allowed by law. In preferred embodiments, the Money Manager 100 manages and advises the member on investment strategies and opportunities available to the member for accumulating interest on their Higher Education Savings Accounts 140. In particularly preferred embodiments, the Money Manager 100 may directly disburse monies regularly and periodically from the member's various funds and accounts comprising their Higher Education Savings Account 140 to the member's higher education creditors. As seen above, the present invention is not limited by the nature of the member's higher education creditors, nor by the nature of the member's debt to a particular higher education creditor. In still other embodiments, the monies accumulated in the funds and accounts of the member's Higher Education Savings Accounts 140 are allowed to accrete for a period of time until they are disbursed.

In additional embodiments, a member may elect from the various investment funds and account options 115 to have the Money Manager 100 direct their earned rebate monies into a Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150. In some embodiments, the various funds and accounts that may comprise a member Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 include money market accounts, regular savings accounts, bond funds, stock index funds, mutual funds, annuities, and any other investment grade security or equity, as allowed by law. In a preferred embodiment, a professional Money Manger 100 manages the monies directed into the various funds and accounts of a member's Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150. In a particular embodiment, the member's earned rebate monies directed to the funds and accounts available under the Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 are held without commingling with those monies of other members held for like purposes. However, in other preferred embodiments, an individual member's earned rebate monies held in the various investment fund and account options under a Higher

Education Charitable Donations Account 150 are aggregated with those of other member's electing to direct their earned rebate monies into Higher Education Charitable Donations Accounts 150.

In particularly preferred embodiments, the monies accumulated in the various funds and accounts options available under Higher Education Charitable Donations Accounts 150 are disbursed regularly or periodically to one or more institutions of higher education. The present invention contemplates that such disbursements to institutions of higher education may occur periodically every month to every 12 months or longer. In other embodiments, the disbursements of monies held in the various funds and accounts available under Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 are made when the monies accrete to a predetermined amount. Alternatively, the disbursements of monies held in the various funds and accounts available under Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 may occur at the behest of the beneficiary institution of higher education. Moreover, the present invention contemplates that disbursements made from a fund or account held under the Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150 may include interest and principal in any ratio or amount.

In still other embodiments, a member may elect from the various investment funds and account options available 115 to have the Money Manager 100 direct their earned rebate monies into a State 529 Savings Account 160. The present invention contemplates that the monies directed into a member's State 529 Savings Account 160 may be held in a number of various funds and accounts as allowed by law. In preferred embodiments, the professional Money Manager 100 directly disburses the funds that are deposited into a member's State 529 Savings Account 160. In still other preferred embodiments, the Money Manger 100 provides periodic investment advice and management services over the member's State 529 Savings Account 160 monies such that the accumulated monies accrete in value.

II. Overview of Existing Registered Member Login and New Member Registration

Figure 2 is a flow chart briefly illustrating the options available to both registered members and un-registered users accessing the TuitionFund.com Web Site (*See* Figure 2, at

210). In particular, Figure 2 briefly illustrates certain embodiments of the present invention highlighting the options available to existing registered members, and those wishing to become registered members, as well as those simply browsing the Web Site.

The present invention contemplates that Internet Access 205 to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210 can be established through any number of methods for connecting to the Internet and visiting a Web site. For example, Internet Access 205 can be achieved through an On-Line Service Provider 201 (*e.g.*, America On Line [AOL], or CompuServe), through an Internet Access/Service Provider 202 (*e.g.*, AT&T Worldnet, EarthLink, or MindSpring), or alternatively through an Intranet Access 203. Once a communications link to the Web has been established, the user may then proceed to their chosen Internet Browser 205 (*e.g.*, Netscape Navigator, or Microsoft, Internet Explorer) in order to access or "visit" the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210. The present invention is not limited by the means employed to establish a connection to the Internet, nor by the particular device used to established the connection.

In preferred embodiments, after accessing the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210, the individual is presented with a number of available services and options offered on the Web Site 210. Thus, the user must Select 215 from the available service and options available at the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210. In some embodiments, the user, if an Existing Registered Member 220, may chose to immediately login and proceed to the Full Member On-Line Privileges/Services/Links 290 pages. Alternatively, in some other embodiments, the user, if an Existing Registered Member 220, may proceed to the Existing Member Account & Personal Information Editor 265. In preferred embodiments, Existing Registered Members 220, may alter their existing member profiles, credit or debit card account information, or make inquires/transfers/disbursements from their various rebate accounts and funds (*See* Figure 1, at 115) in the Existing Member Account & Personal Information Editor 265. One skilled in the art will appreciate the security and confidentiality safeguards necessary for the safe operation of this area of the present invention, as well as the overall operation of the methods and systems of the present invention.

In other embodiments, the user, if not previously registered, may Select 215 to proceed to New Member Registration 230. The present invention contemplates that New Member

Registration 230 may involve providing certain member identifying information to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210. For example, the new member may be required to proceed to a Member Credit Card Registration 240 page. At the Member Credit Card Registration 240 page, the new member can specify the account numbers they wish to have charged for their various on-line purchases at the Full member On-line Privileges/Services/Links 290 pages. The member may also desire to register other accounts for their off-line purchase, or use the same accounts. In preferred embodiments, members can register their *e.g.*, credit cards, debit cards, checking account numbers, etc. Registration information may be saved in computer readable memory 245 at the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210 or at another data storage point (*e.g.*, the Rebate Network Manager) or both. Moreover, the present invention contemplates that information required during New Member Registration 230 may be further transmitted to other entities involved in awarding member rebates, or for other purposes (*See e.g.*, Rebate Network Manager [Figure 1, at 100], or Money Manager [Figure 1, at 110]). In other preferred embodiments, the point of New Member Registration 230, may further comprise selecting from the various investment account and funds options available for depositing the rebate monies earned as a TuitionFund.com member (*See*, Figure 1, at 115). Accordingly, the Member Registration page 240 may provide any information necessary for selecting from the funds and account options available to registered members (*See*, Figure 1, at 115). Once the previously unregistered user becomes a registered member, they may proceed directly to the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links pages 290.

In other embodiments, after accessing the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210 and when faced with Selecting 215 desired pages or links, the user may proceed directly to Selected On-line Content Pages/Services/Links 250. In particularly preferred embodiments, the Selected On-line Content Pages/Services/Links 250 may comprise all the pages, services, and links available to registered members, except links to merchants participating in the TuitionFund.com rebates methods and systems. In preferred embodiments, once a user has accessed the Selected On-line Content Pages/Services/Links page 250, the user may proceed to the Existing Member Login page 260, and from this page the member may proceed to the Full Member On-Line Privileges/Services/Links 290 pages. Alternatively, in some

embodiments, the user may proceed to the Existing Member Account & Personal Information Editor 266. In preferred embodiments, Existing Registered Members 260 may alter their existing member profiles, credit or debit card account information, or make inquires/transfers/disbursements from their various rebate investment accounts and funds (*See* Figure 1, at 115).

In other embodiments, the user, if not previously registered, may Select 255 to proceed to New Member Registration 270. The present invention contemplates that New Member Registration 270 may involve providing certain member identifying information to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 210. For example, the new member may be required to proceed to a Member Credit Card Registration 280 page. At the Member Credit Card Registration 280 page, the new member can specify the account numbers they wish to use for their various on-line purchases at the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links 290 pages. In preferred embodiments, members can register their *e.g.*, credit cards, debit cards, checking account numbers, etc. Registration information may be saved in computer readable memory 275 at the TuitionFund.com Web site or at another point of data storage (*e.g.*, the Rebate Network Manager) or both. Moreover, the present invention contemplates that information required during New Member Registration 270 may be further transmitted to other entities involved in awarding member rebates, or for other purposes (*See e.g.*, Rebate Network Manager [Figure 1, at 100], or Money Manager [Figure 1, at 110]). In other preferred embodiments, the point of New Member Registration 270, may further comprise, selecting from the various investment account and fund options available for depositing the rebate monies earned as a TuitionFund.com member (*See*, Figure 1, at 115). Accordingly, the Member Credit Card Registration page 270 may provide any information necessary for selecting from the investment fund and account options available to registered members (*See*, Figure 1, at 115). Once the previously unregistered user becomes a registered member, they may proceed to the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links pages 290.

In some embodiments, nonmembers may have access to all features and services, including links to merchants, as registered members, except that nonmembers will not earn rebates on their purchases.

III. Overview of the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links

Figure 3 is a flow chart briefly illustrating a number of the various options available to registered members after login to the TuitionFund.com Web Site in preferred embodiments (*See* Figure 2, at 210). Once a registered member accesses the TuitionFund.com Web Site (*See* Figure 2, at 210) and proceeds through the sequence of events for member login, the member may then browse among the content pages, links, and services that comprise the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links 300 pages and thus, Select 305 content pages, links, or services of interest. In some embodiments, the registered member may Select 305 to proceed to the Web Site's Original Content Pages 310. In some preferred embodiments, the Original Content Pages 310 may comprise articles of interest to those in the field of higher education. Further, the present invention contemplates that the articles of interest in the Original Content Pages 310 may comprise essays, news articles, topical discussions, instructive content, surveys, informative pieces, or monographs, authored by individuals and organizations involved in higher education.

In alternative embodiments, the registered member may Select 305 to proceed to any one or more of a number or list of links to Participating Merchant Web Sites 315 that offer rebates to registered members. Thus, the registered member then Selects 320 a particular participating Merchant Web Site 315 of interest and proceeds to visit that merchant's web Page 321. In particularly preferred embodiments, the links to Participating Merchant Web Site pages 315 are categorized into sites with similar or related content. Alternatively, the registered member may Select 320 to view (*i.e.*, browse) pages of Off-line Merchant Information Lists 322 lists in their area that offer members rebates. The Off-line Merchant Information Lists 322 may, similarly, be categorized into merchants with similar or related content in a given defined local.

In some embodiments, the registered member may Select 305 to proceed to the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area 325 of the TuitionFund.com Web Site. The present invention contemplates that the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area 325 may comprise links and pages of interest to those interested in all aspects of education, and particularly higher education. Selected Educational/Topical Web Site area 325 topics include, but are not limited to, an Educational Focused Search Engine 330, Admissions

Materials/Virtual College Tours 340, Alumni Web Sites 350, and Financial Aid/Scholarship Information 360, etc.

Thus, in some embodiments, the registered member viewing the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites 325 page may proceed to the Web Site's Educational Focused Search Engine 330. In preferred embodiments, the Educational Focused Search Engine 330 search engine may comprise Galaxy.com, or other like search engines. Registered members proceeding to run a search on the site's Educational Focused Search Engine 330 will Select 335 from the results of their searches to view one or a number of Pages 336 related to topics and issues in higher education. In other embodiments, registered members who run searches from the Educational Focused Search Engine 330 may Select 335 to proceed to Participating Merchant Web Sites 315.

In other embodiments of the present invention, the registered member may proceed from the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area 325 to the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340. In preferred embodiments, Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 may comprise pages posted directly to the TuitionFund.com Web Site by various institutions of higher education, or alternatively, may comprise links to such pages. In some embodiments, the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 may comprise multimedia presentations or links to multimedia presentations from various institutions of higher education. In other embodiments, various institutions of higher education may post electronic admissions forms on the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 or links to such forms. The present invention also contemplates that the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 may comprise informative, topical, or entertaining pages posted by various institutions of higher education or links to such pages. Registered members entering the Admissions Materials/Virtual College Tours pages 340 will thus Select 345 from these and other highlighted options to before proceeding one or more Pages 346 of interest.

In still other embodiments, the registered user may proceed from the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area 325 to various Alumni Web Sites 350 links and pages. The registered member may Select 355 to proceed to any one or more of a number of links and Pages 356 in this area. Examples of Pages 356 in this area include, but are not limited

to, links and pages offering special alumni organization offers and incentives, information and links to the athletics programs at the various institutions, information or links on alumni networking and career development resources, and message, bulletin-boards, or chat groups for alumni, etc.

In yet other embodiments, a link to Financial Aid/Scholarship Information 360 links and pages may be provided from the Selected Educational/Topical Web Sites area 325. In preferred embodiments, the Financial Aid/Scholarship Information 360 links and pages may comprise topical articles, financial tools and calculators, as well as information provided by state and federal government agencies, and private and institutional higher education lenders. In other preferred embodiments, the various institutions of higher education may provide links and pages concerning their particular financial aid policies and scholarship opportunities. Additionally, in other embodiments, private charitable institutions may provide information or their various aid and scholarship opportunities.

The above-mentioned embodiments of the Full Member On-line Privileges/Services/Links 300 are merely representative of several specific embodiments that comprise the present invention; other embodiments relative to higher education will be evident to those skilled in the art.

IV. Preferred Merchant / Member Rebate Sales Schemes

A. On-line Merchants Registered with a Rebate Network Manager

Figure 4 is a flow chart that briefly illustrates one contemplated on-line merchant rebate sales scheme. In preferred embodiments, a Registered Member 400 with an established on-line connection (*See* Figure 2, at 201-203, and 205) proceeds to enter the Tuitionfund.com Web Site 410. Once the member obtains access to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 410, the member may then generally proceed to the participating on-line merchants links and pages area (*See* Figure 3, at 315). Next, the present invention contemplates that the registered member will Select 415 one or more participating merchants from which to purchase goods and/or services. In particularly preferred embodiments, the selected On-line Merchant 420 will be registered with a Rebate Network Manager 430. The present invention contemplates that the Rebate Network Manager 430 monitors the sales of its Registered On-line Merchants

420. When a registered merchant consummates a sale of goods or services with a Registered Member 400, the Rebate Network Manager 430 debits the account of the Registered On-line Merchant 420, based on an existing formula, and calculates the rebate due the Registered Member 400. The present invention also contemplates that the Rebate Network Manager 430 receives a small percentage of each consummated sale involving one of its Registered On-line Merchants 420, and also calculates a percent fee, from .001 – 30.00%, based on the sum of the particular transaction, as a payment to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 410. The Rebate Network Manager 430 disburses the rebate sum earned by a particular Registered Member 400 from each transaction with a Registered On-Line Merchant 420, to the professional Money Manager 440 for further disbursement into the Registered Member's 400 various investment Fund and Accounts options 450 (*See also* Figure 1, at 115). In preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 430 affiliate may comprise a service such as InfoSpace.com. In addition, as stated above, in particular embodiments, the professional Money Managers 440 contemplated may comprise Charles Schwab, Fidelity, American Express, or Merrill Lynch.

B. Merchants Not Registered with a Rebate Network Manager

Figure 5 is a flow chart briefly illustrating another contemplated merchant rebate scheme. In a preferred embodiment, a Registered Member 500 with an established on-line connection (*See* Figure 2, at 201-203, and 205) proceeds to enter the TuitionFund.com Web Site 510. Once the member obtains access to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 510, the member may then generally proceed to the participating on-line merchants links and pages area (See Figure 3, at 315). Next, the present invention contemplates that the Registered Member 500 will proceed to Select 515 one or more participating On-line Merchants 520 (*i.e.*, merchants affiliated/registered with the tracking entity, but not registered with network rebate manager) for purchasing goods/services. It is contemplated that the Registered Member 500 and the On-line Merchants 520 will proceed to consummate a transaction for the sale of goods/services.

In preferred embodiments, a Tracking Entity 530 monitors and compiles information about the transactions between Registered Members 500 and On-line Merchants 520. In

preferred embodiments, The Tracking Entity 530 will periodically and regularly communicate this information to either TuitionFund.com or the TuitionFund.com Web Site 510. The present invention contemplates that the such information may include the date, transaction amount, the rebate due, or rebate percentage offered, and member account information, etc. The present invention also contemplates that the On-line Merchants 520 will remit directly to an account maintained by TuitionFund.com or another entity any rebate monies earned by Registered Members 500 from the sale of goods/services. The amount of the rebate monies awarded by the On-line Merchants 520 to Registered Members 500 may vary based on established formulas, sale incentives, or other calculations particular to the On-line merchants 520.

In other preferred embodiments, the On-line Merchant 520 directly remits to TuitionFund.com a percentage, or fixed amount, of each Registered Member's 500 transactions it consummates as revenue to the TuitionFund.com. In some embodiments, the percentage remitted by the On-line Merchant is based on total sales to Registered Members 500. Alternatively, the sum remitted may be based on a fixed percentage amount (*e.g.*, .001 - 30.00) of each sale to an individual Registered Member 500. In particularly preferred embodiments, the On-line Merchant 520 establishes and funds a debitable account held at TuitionFund.com, or another entity, for the purpose of disbursing from such account those monies earned by Registered Members 500 on purchases consummated with the particular On-line Merchant 520. Alternatively, the On-line Merchant may deposit funds into an aggregate account held at TuitionFund.com, or another entity, such aggregate account comprising rebate funds from numerous On-line Merchants 520. It is contemplated that each On-line Merchant will deposit in either the aggregate account or an account particular to that On-line Merchant 520 preferably a sum of from about 10,000 - 50,000 dollars, more preferably from 50,000 to 100,000 dollars, and most preferably from 100,000 to 1,000,000 or more dollars. The present invention contemplates that the On-line Merchant debitable account may be funded by the On-line Merchant regularly and periodically, or at such times as agreed upon by TuitionFund.com and the particular On-line Merchant 520. the present invention further contemplates that TuitionFund.com may use any portion of the On-line Merchant 520 debitable account funds for any lawful purpose, and may collect and use any

interest or premiums that may accrue on the debitable accounts.

In preferred embodiments, the Tracking Entity 530 provides relevant reports concerning Registered Member 500 transactions with On-line Merchants 520 to a Rebate Network Manager 550. The content of such reports may include, but is not limited to, information concerning the date and time of particular transaction, Registered Member 500 identification, the particular On-line Merchant, the rebate monies due to the Registered member 500, the amount owed TuitionFund.com, and any other relevant information about the transaction.

In certain preferred embodiments, the Tracking Entity 530 will periodically and regularly communicate information concerning member transactions to TuitionFund.com. The present invention further contemplates that the such information may include the date, transaction amount, the rebate due, or rebate percentage offered, and member account information, etc. Additionally, the Tracking Entity 530 may communicate information to TuitionFund.com concerning Registered Member 500 spending habits, for example, compiled information on the frequency of purchases, genera of merchants visited, or other topical information obtained by the Tracking Entity 530 from the various On-line Merchants 520. Alternatively, TuitionFund.com may collect and order the various Registered Member 500 purchasing data and information communicated to it from the Tracking Entity 530. The present invention further contemplates that member purchasing information may be gathered from an number of sources, including but not limited to, the various merchant rebate schemes disclosed, from an affiliated tracking entity/rebate network manager, or from third party consumer monitoring and market research organizations. In other preferred embodiments, and subject to TuitionFund's member terms and conditions and privacy policy, member purchasing information may solicit advertising interest from site and organizations not already registered or affiliated with TuitionFund.com. Additionally, subject to TuitionFund's member terms and conditions and privacy policy, TuitionFund.com may communicate information concerning the transactions between one or more Registered Members 500 and one or more On-line Merchants 520. For example, TuitionFund.com may communicate any pertinent information concerning the gross sales, unit volumes, and/or marketing and consumer research, of one or more On-line Merchants 520, or more particular information concerning one or more

Registered Member's 500 spending purchases and the like.

The present invention contemplates that the Rebate Network Manager 540 may use the information communicated to it by TuitionFund.com for any agreed upon business purposes. The Rebate Network Manager 540 may likewise further tabulate and calculate any sums due or owing to either TuitionFund.com or the Registered Member 500 from this information. In particularly preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 540 may debit the debitable accounts established by the On-line Merchants 520 and transfer a particular earned rebate to the Money Manager 550; alternatively, TuitionFund.com may debit these debitable accounts and transfer the earned rebate to the Money Manager 650. Additionally, the present invention contemplates that any Registered Member 500 rebate monies earned that are transferred may be transferred in the aggregate for a particular grouping of Registered Members 500, or particular grouping of Registered Member 500 transactions.

Thus, the present invention contemplates that any necessary information for awarding or allocating an earned sum to a particular member may be performed by the Rebate Network Manager 540 based on the information communicated to it by On-line Merchant(s) 520, the Tracking Entity 530, or TuitionFund.com. Alternatively, in yet other embodiments, the information may be attached to the ultimate transfer of member earned rebate monies to the Money Manager 550 for disbursement and award to a particular Registered Member's Rebate Accounts 560 (*See also*, Figure 1, at 115). In still further embodiments, TuitionFund.com may transfer the rebate monies earned by Register Members 500 directly to the Money Manager 650. In these particular embodiments, the present invention contemplates that the transfer of monies from TuitionFund.com to the Money Manager 550 may also entail and pertinent data for disbursing the monies. The present invention is not intended to be limited to any particular methodology for awarding and accrediting a particular member with his/her earned rebate monies.

The present invention is also not intended to be limited by the terms of calculating either the rebate monies earned by Registered Members 500, or the revenue monies due to TuitionFund.com from transactions between Registered Members 500 and particular On-line Merchants 520. Indeed, any commercially practicable agreement may be accepted within the scope of the present invention. Moreover, the present invention is not intended to be limited

to any of the described calculations for determining whether a sum is payable or owing to any party. Furthermore, where any such sums are payable or owing, it is not intended that the present invention be limited by the method of transferring such sums or amounts (*e.g.*, checks, drafts, negotiable instruments, offsets, credits, or any other means of transferring wealth). The present invention is also not intended to be limited by the means employed to accomplish any particular transfer of a sum due or owing (*e.g.*, electronic transfers, wire transfers, checks, debits, and the like, are all within the scope of the present invention).

In some preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 540 may comprise service providers such as, but not limited to, InfoSpace.com. In other preferred embodiments, the Tracking Entity 530 may comprise service providers, such as but not limited to, LinkShare.com, or Befree.com.

C. Off-line Merchants

Figure 6 is a flow chart briefly illustrating yet another contemplated merchant rebate sales scheme. Registered Member (off-line) 600 may Select 605 to visit a Point-of-Sale Merchant 610 (*i.e.*, at the merchant's place of business). In preferred embodiments, the Registered Member (off-line) 600 and the Point-of-Sale Merchant 610 will consummate a sale of goods or services. In preferred embodiments, the Point-of-Sale Merchant 610 is indirectly connected via a communications link to a Rebate Network Manager 630. The present invention contemplates that the Point-Sale-Merchant 610 will be registered with the Rebate Network Manager 630. In particularly preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 630 calculates the rebate due the Registered Member 600 based on an existing formula, and then debits the account of the Point-of-Sale Merchant 610 for the rebate awarded the Registered Member (off-line) 600. The present invention further contemplates that the Rebate Network Manager 630 receives a small percentage of each consummated sale involving a Point-of-sale Merchant 610, and also calculates a percent fee, from .001 – 30.00%, based on the sum of the particular transaction, as a payment to the TuitionFund.com Web Site 640. The Rebate Network Manager 630 disburses the rebate sum earned by a particular Registered Member 600 from each transaction with a Point-of-Sale Merchant 610, to the professional Money Manager 650 for further disbursement into the Registered Member's 600 various

investment Funds and Accounts 660 (*See also* Figure 1, at 115). In preferred embodiments, the Rebate Network Manager 630 affiliate may comprise a service such as InfoSpace.com, or like service providers. Also, as stated above, in particular embodiments, the professional Money Managers 650 contemplated may comprise Charles Schwab, Fidelity, American Express, or Merrill Lynch, or similar financial services firms.

All publications and patents mentioned in the above specification are herein incorporated by reference. Various modifications and variations of the described method and system of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention. Although the invention has been described in connection with specific preferred embodiments, it should be understood that the invention as claimed should not be unduly limited to such specific embodiments. Indeed, various modifications of the described modes for carrying out the invention which are obvious to those skilled in relevant fields are intended to be within the scope of the following claims.

CLAIMS

We claim:

1. A method comprising:

a) providing:

i) a member,

ii) at least one higher education account, and

iii) at least one merchant offering a rebate;

b) calculating said rebate on purchases made by said member from said at least one merchant;

c) crediting said at least one higher education account.

2. The method of Claim 1, wherein said calculating step is performed by a processor configured to calculate said rebate.

3. The method of Claim 2, wherein said processor is located at a rebate network manager.

4. The method of Claim 2, wherein said at least one higher education account is stored in a computer memory area and said processor is connected to said higher education account via a computer network.

5. The method of Claim 1, wherein said crediting step is performed by a processor configured to credit said at least one higher education account.

6. The method of Claim 1, wherein said higher education accounts are selected from the group consisting of a student loan payment account, an educational IRA, a college fund savings account, and a college charitable contribution account.

7. The method of Claim 1, further comprising step

d) managing said at least one higher education account.

8. The method of Claim 1, wherein said crediting step further comprises crediting said higher education account with an amount equal to or less than said rebate.

9. The method of Claim 8, wherein said rebate is from 1-30% of said purchases.

10. The method of Claim 1, further comprising providing a rebate network manager, wherein said rebate network manager tracks said purchases and said rebates.

11. The method of Claim 11, wherein said rebate network manager debits said merchant and credits said higher education account.

12. The method of Claim 1, wherein said purchases are made via a credit card.

13. The method of Claim 1, wherein said purchases are made on-line.

14. The method of Claim 1, wherein said purchases are made on-site.

15. The method of Claim 1, further comprising providing a tracking entity, wherein said tracking entity tracks said purchases and said rebates.

16. The method of Claim 1, further comprising providing a registration organization, wherein said registration receives a portion of said rebate.

17. A method comprising:

a) providing:

i) a member,

ii) at least one higher education account,

iii) at least one merchant,

iv) a computer network,

v) a rebate network manager, and

vi) a processor;

b) via said processor, calculating a rebate on purchases made by said member from said at least one merchant and debiting said at least one merchant and crediting said at least one higher education account, wherein said purchases are tracked by said rebate network manager and said processor and said rebate network manager are connected via said computer network.

18. The method of Claim 17, wherein said higher education accounts are selected from the group consisting of a student loan payment account, an educational IRA, a college fund savings account, and a college charitable contribution account.

19. The method of Claim 17, wherein said higher education account is a student loan payment account.

20. The method of Claim 19, further comprising step

d) transferring funds from said student loan payment account to a student loan provider via said computer network.

21. The method of Claim 17, wherein said higher education account is an educational IRA

22. The method of Claim 17, wherein said higher education account is a college fund savings account.

23. The method of Claim 17, wherein said higher education account is a college charitable contribution account.

24. A system comprising:

a memory device comprising member higher education accounts;

a processor configured to calculate a rebate on purchases and to credit said member higher education accounts with proceeds from said rebate, wherein said memory device and said processor are connected via a computer network.

25. The system of Claim 24, wherein said higher education accounts are selected from the group consisting of a student loan payment account, an educational IRA, a college fund savings account, and a college charitable contribution account.

26. The system of Claim 24, wherein said rebate is from about 1% to 30% of the price of said purchases.

27. The system of Claim 24, wherein said purchases are made via a credit card or debit card.

28. The system of Claim 24, wherein said purchases are tracked by a rebate network manager.

29. The system of Claim 28, wherein said rebate network manager tracks said purchases by correlating a registered credit number with said purchases.

30. The system of Claim 24, wherein said purchases are tracked by tracking entity in communication with a rebate network manager.

31. The system of Claim 24, wherein said rebate on purchases is provided by an on-line merchant.

32. The system of Claim 24, wherein said rebate on purchases is provided by an on-site merchant.

33. A system comprising:

a memory device; and

a processor in communication with said memory device, said processor configured to receive a credit from a rebate network manager and place the credit in a higher education account stored in said memory device.

34. The system of Claim 33, wherein said higher education accounts are selected from the group consisting of a student loan payment account, an educational IRA, a college fund savings account, and a college charitable contribution account.

35. A method comprising:

a) providing:

i) at least one merchant offering a rebate,

ii) an account,

iii) a rebate network manager, and

iv) a tracking entity, wherein said at least one merchant is registered with said tracking entity;

b) transferring funds corresponding to said rebate from said at least one merchant to said account;

c) debiting said account, wherein said debiting is performed by said rebate network manager based on a report generated by said tracking entity.

36. The method of Claim 35, wherein said transferring step is performed by a processor configured to transfer said funds.

37 The method of Claim 36, wherein said transferring is via a computer network.

38. The method of Claim 36, wherein said processor is located at said at least one merchant offering a rebate.

39. The method of Claim 35, wherein said account is located at an organization registering members.

40. The method of Claim 35, wherein said debiting of said account by said rebate network manager is performed by a processor.

41. The method of Claim 35, wherein said at least one merchant offering a rebate are on-line merchants.

42. The method of Claim 35, wherein said account is an aggregation of said funds from said at least one merchant offering a rebate.

43. A system comprising:

a memory device comprising accounts from at least one merchant offering a rebate;

a processor configured to debit said accounts, wherein said debiting is performed by a rebate network manager based on a report generated by a tracking entity.

44. The system of Claim 43, wherein said accounts are located at an organization registering members.

45. The system of Claim 43, wherein said debiting of said account by said rebate network manager is performed by a processor.

46. The system of Claim 43, wherein said at least one merchant offering a rebate is an on-line merchant.

47. The system of Claim 43, wherein said rebate is from about 1% to 30% of the price of a purchase.

48. The system of Claim 43, wherein said purchase is tracked by said tracking entity.

Doc Code: Petition

ABSTRACT

The present invention relates to methods and systems for funding a college education by accumulating and managing merchant rebates. The present invention also relates to methods and systems for enrolling and registering members in an organization through the organization provision of topical information and materials, useful links to, and information on, Internet and non-Internet based merchants, related to a college education. In particular, the present invention relates to facilitating retail transactions between an organization registered members and selected merchants who offer rebates on the transactions between themselves and the organization members so that the rebates are accumulated and provided for funding a college education.

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FIGURE 1

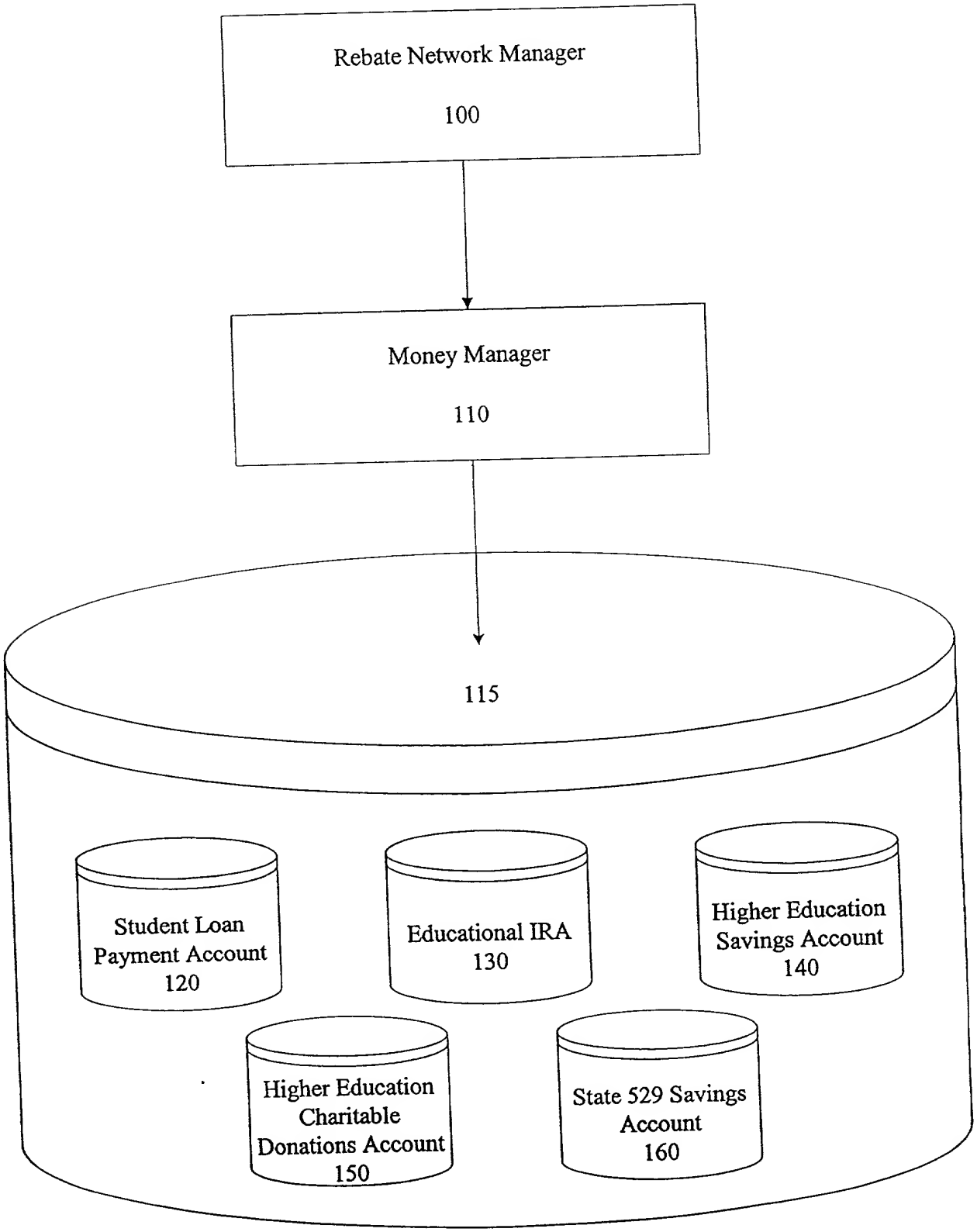

Rebate Network Manager
100
Money Manager
110
115
Student Loan Payment Account 120
Educational IRA 130
Higher Education Savings Account 140
Higher Education Charitable Donations Account 150
State 529 Savings Account 160

FIGURE 2

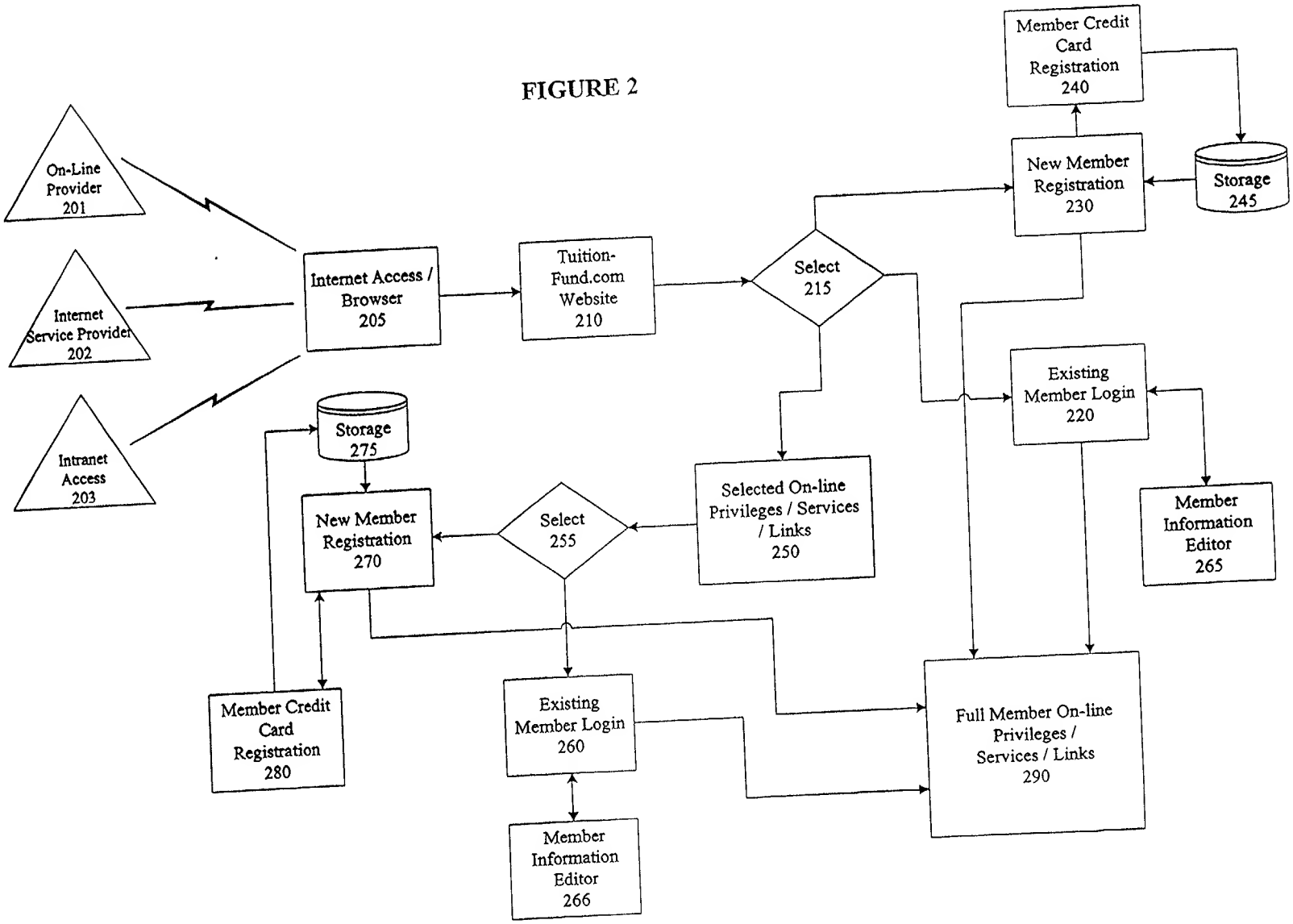

On-Line Provider 201
Internet Service Provider 202
Intranet Access 203
Internet Access / Browser 205
Tuition-Fund.com Website 210
Select 215
Member Credit Card Registration 240
New Member Registration 230
Storage 245
Existing Member Login 220
Member Information Editor 265
Storage 275
New Member Registration 270
Select 255
Selected On-line Privileges / Services / Links 250
Member Credit Card Registration 280
Existing Member Login 260
Member Information Editor 266
Full Member On-line Privileges / Services / Links 290

FIGURE 3

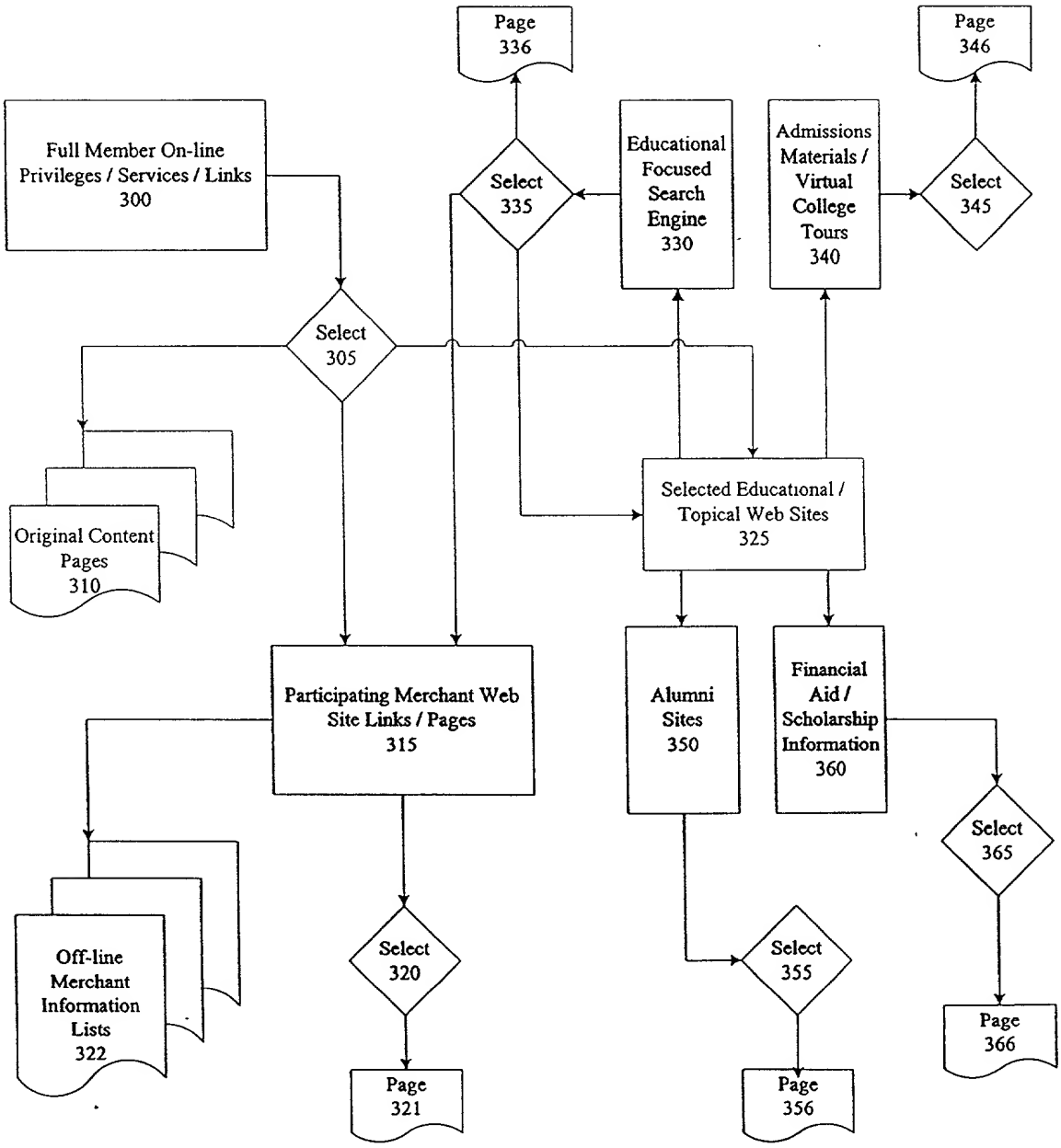

Page 336
Page 346
Full Member On-line Privileges / Services / Links 300
Select 335
Educational Focused Search Engine 330
Admissions Materials / Virtual College Tours 340
Select 345
Select 305
Original Content Pages 310
Selected Educational / Topical Web Sites 325
Participating Merchant Web Site Links / Pages 315
Alumni Sites 350
Financial Aid / Scholarship Information 360
Select 365
Off-line Merchant Information Lists 322
Select 320
Select 355
Page 366
Page 321
Page 356

FIGURE 4

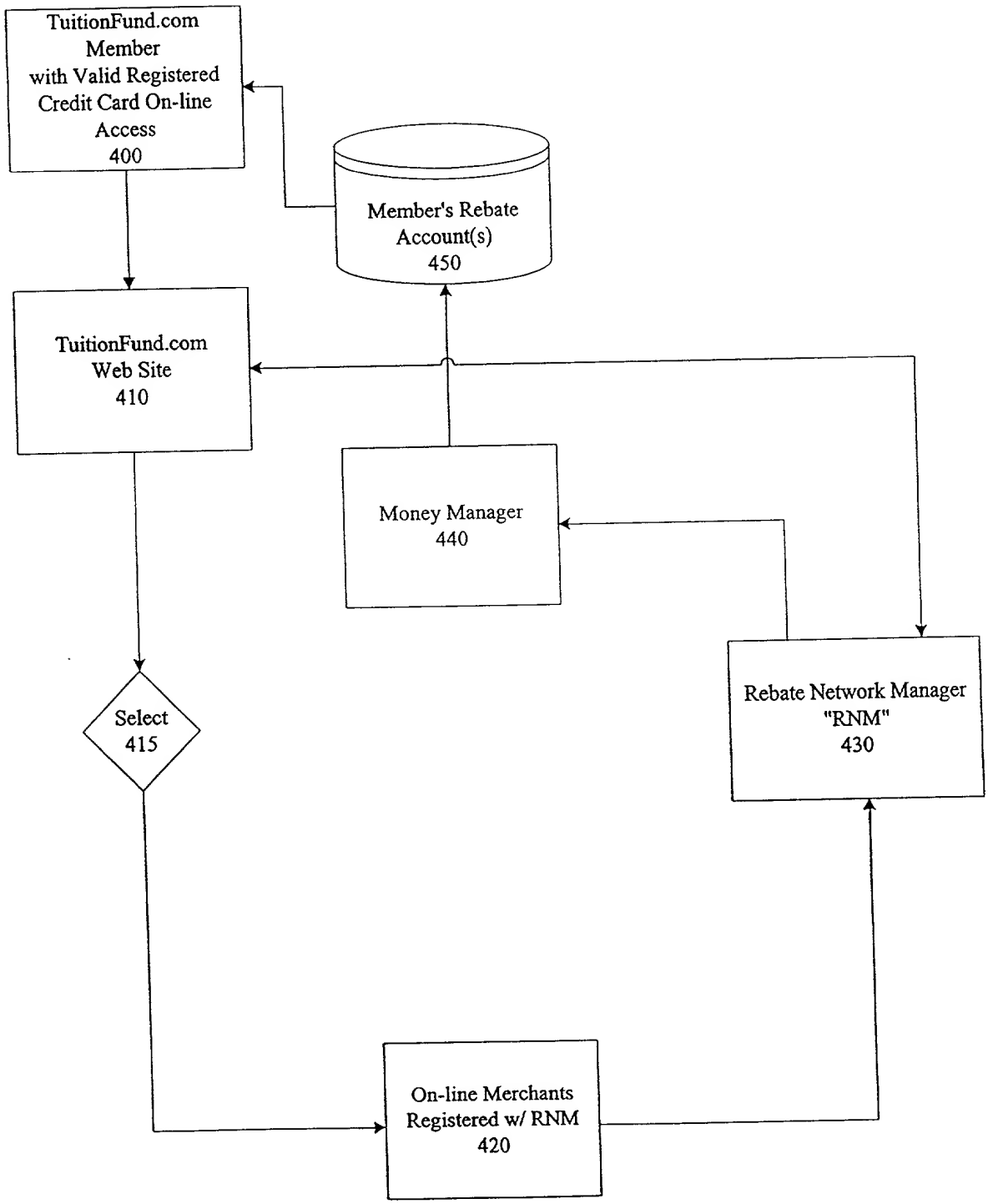

TuitionFund.com Member with Valid Registered Credit Card On-line Access 400
Member's Rebate Account(s) 450
TuitionFund.com Web Site 410
Money Manager 440
Rebate Network Manager "RNM" 430
Select 415
On-line Merchants Registered w/ RNM 420

FIGURE 5

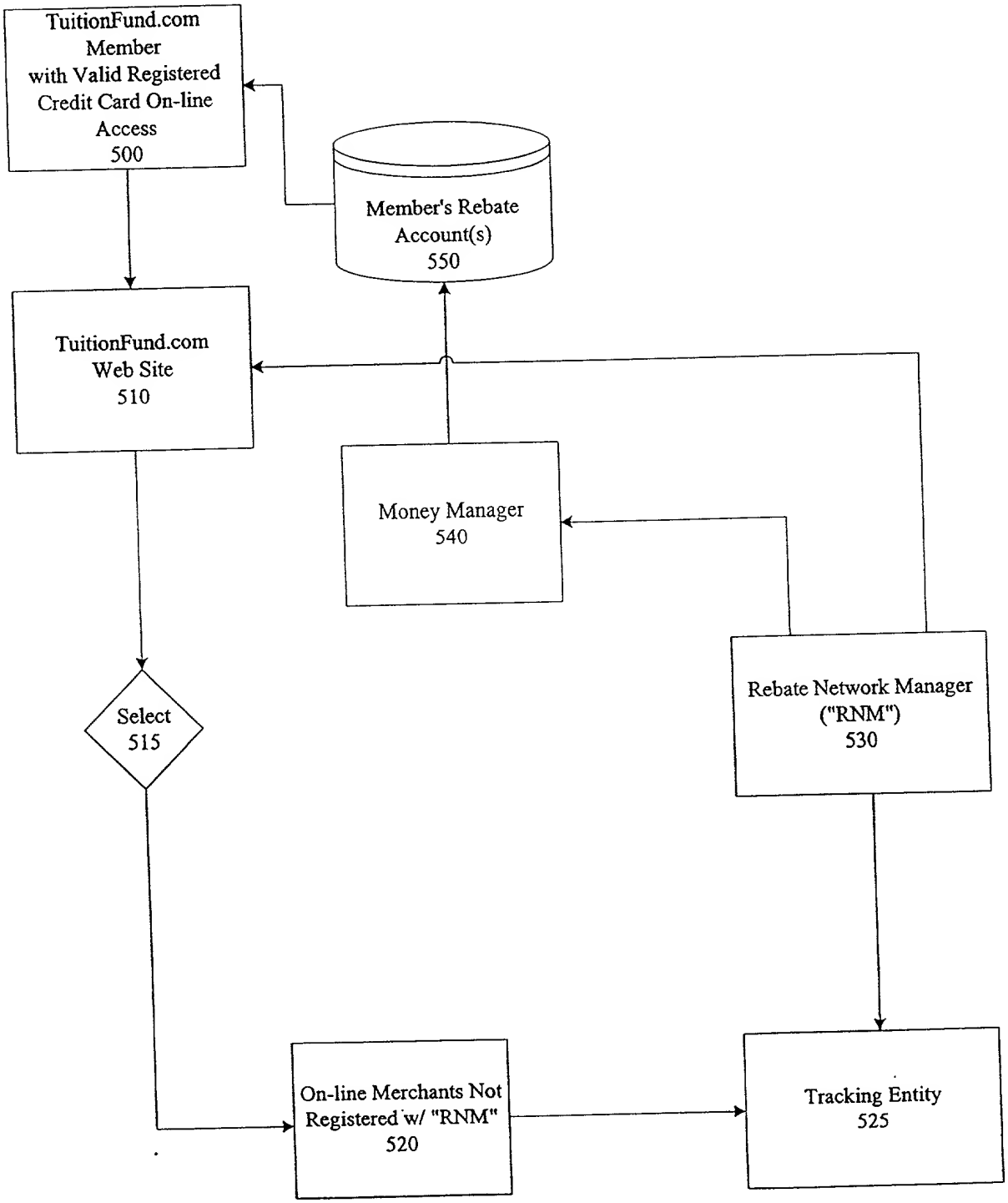
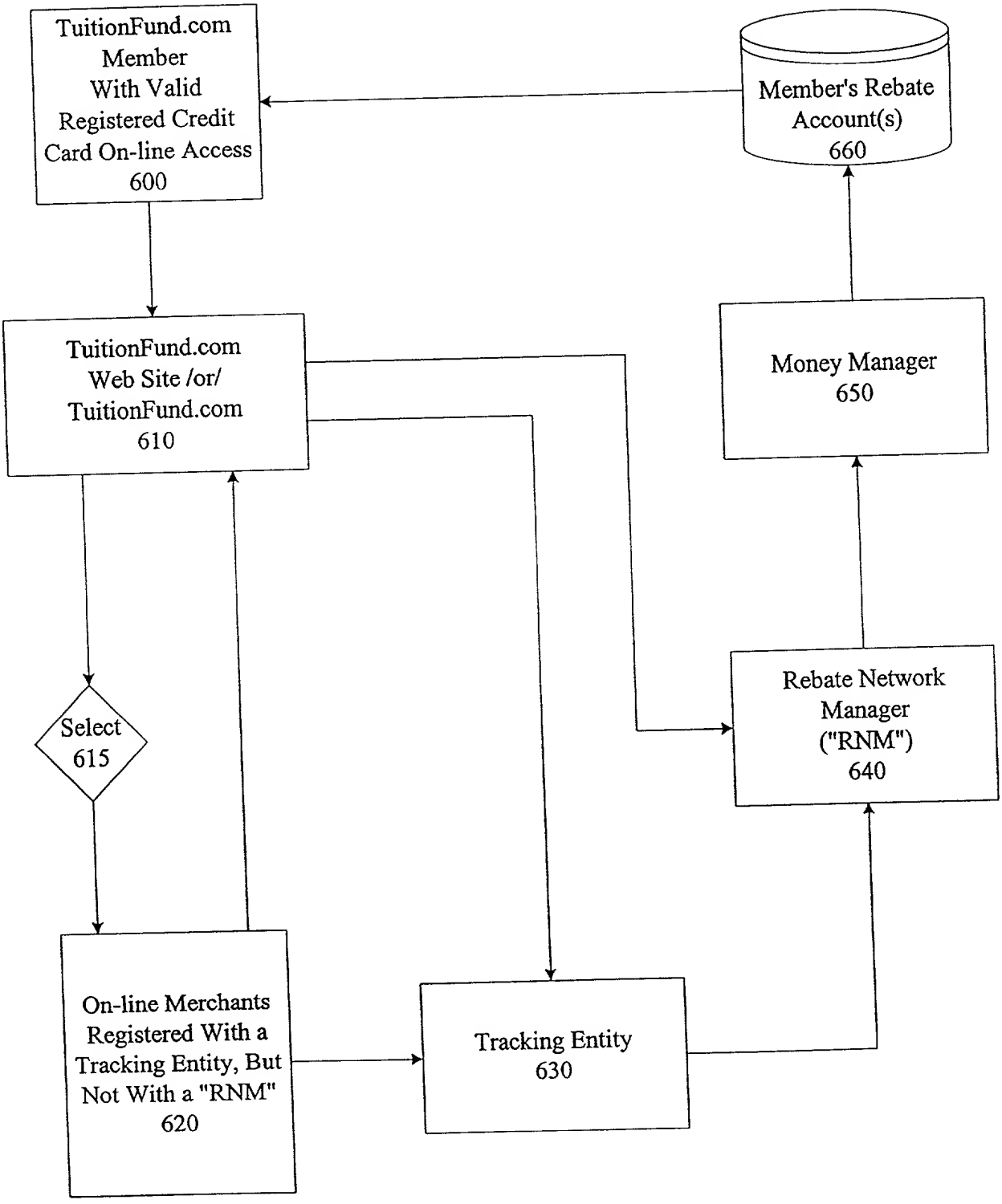

TuitionFund.com Member with Valid Registered Credit Card On-line Access 500
Member's Rebate Account(s) 550
TuitionFund.com Web Site 510
Money Manager 540
Rebate Network Manager ("RNM") 530
Select 515
On-line Merchants Not Registered w/ "RNM" 520
Tracking Entity 525

FIGURE 6


TuitionFund.com Member With Valid Registered Credit Card On-line Access 600
Member's Rebate Account(s) 660
TuitionFund.com Web Site /or/ TuitionFund.com 610
Money Manager 650
Select 615
Rebate Network Manager ("RNM") 640
On-line Merchants Registered With a Tracking Entity, But Not With a "RNM" 620
Tracking Entity 630

DECLARATION FOR PATENT APPLICATION

As a below-named inventor, I hereby declare that:

My residence, post office address and citizenship are as stated next to my name. I believe I am an original, first and joint inventor of the subject matter which is claimed and for which a patent is sought on the invention entitled **Methods And Systems For Applying Rebates To Higher Eduction**, the specification of which is attached hereto. I hereby state that I have reviewed and understand the contents of the above-identified specification, including the claims, as amended by any amendment referred to above.

I acknowledge the duty to disclose information which is material to the examination of this application in accordance with Title 37, Code of Federal Regulations, § 1.56(a).

I hereby claim the benefit under Title 35, United States Code, § 120 of any United States application(s) listed below and, insofar as the subject matter of each of the claims of this application is not disclosed in the prior United States application in the manner provided by the first paragraph of Title 35, United States Code, § 112, I acknowledge the duty to disclose material information as defined in Title 37, Code of Federal Regulations, § 1.56(a) which occurred between the filing date of the prior application and the national or PCT international filing date of this application:

60/208,727	06/02/2000	Pending
Application Serial No.	*Filing Date*	*Patented, Pending or Abandoned*

I hereby declare that all statements made herein of my own knowledge are true and that all statements made on information and belief are believed to be true; and further that these statements were made with the knowledge that willful false statements and the like so made are punishable by fine or imprisonment or both, under § 1001 of Title 18 of the United States Code and that such willful false statements may jeopardize the validity of the application or any patent issued thereon.

Full Name of Sole or First Inventor: **William C. O'Neil, Jr.**

Inventor's Signature: WCO'Neil Jr. Date: 10/23/00
Residence: 5035 Hillplace Drive,Nashville, TN 37205 Citizenship: United States of America
Post Office Address: 5035 Hillplace Drive,Nashville, TN 37205

Full Name of Second Joint Inventor: **Michael P. Thompson**

Inventor's Signature: Michael P Thompson Date: 10/23/00
Residence: 801 North Lortiswood Lane, Nashville, TN 37204 Citizenship: United States of America
Post Office Address: 801 North Lortiswood Lane, Nashville, TN 37204

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE

In re Application of: William C. O'Neil, Jr. *et al.* Group No.:
Serial No.: Examiner:
Filed:
Entitled: **Methods And Systems For Applying Rebates To Higher Eduction**

POWER OF ATTORNEY BY ASSIGNEE

Assistant Commissioner for Patents
Washington, D.C. 20231

TuitionFund, Inc., as Assignee of record of the entire interest of the above-identified patent application, hereby appoints the members of the firm of MEDLEN & CARROLL, LLP, a firm composed of:

Virginia S. Medlen	(Reg. No. 32,050)	Maha A. Hamdan	(Reg. No. 43,655)
Peter G. Carroll	(Reg. No. 32,837)	J. Mitchell Jones	(Reg. No. 44,174)
Kamrin T. MacKnight	(Reg. No. 38,230)	David J. Wilson	(Reg. No. 45,225)
David A. Casimir	(Reg. No. 42,395)	Jason R. Bond	(Reg. No. 45,439)
		Jaen Andrews	(Reg. No. 35,051)

as its attorneys with full power of substitution to prosecute this application and transact all business in the Patent and Trademark Office in connection therewith.

Please direct all future correspondence and telephone calls regarding this application to:

J. Mitchell Jones
MEDLEN & CARROLL, LLP
220 Montgomery Street, Suite 2200 Telephone: 415/705-8410
San Francisco, California 94104 Facsimile: 415/397-8338

I hereby certify that the Assignment document filed with the application or filed subsequent to the filing date of the application, has been reviewed and I hereby certify that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, title is with TuitionFund, Inc.

Dated: 10/24/00

By: WCO'Neil Jr.

Name: William C. O'Neil, JR

Title: Chief Executive Officer
TuitionFund, Inc.
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Nashville, TN 37205